

M24 MIDGET SUBMARINE SHIPWRECK 1942

Information Sheet
Heritage Office, Department of
Planning



M24, a Type A Japanese Imperial Navy midget submarine. Model courtesy: Animax Films, Sydney.

Introduction

The Japanese midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour was audacious and would have been even more spectacular had the primary military targets been successfully damaged. The attack showed the vulnerability of ports like Sydney, Australia, to long-range Japanese submarine patrols and the need for heightened security. Many Sydney-siders still recall the moments at night on 31 May / 1 June 1942 as the harbour lit up with depth charge explosions, tracer fire and criss-crossing harbour defence vessels. The explosion as a Japanese torpedo struck under the depot ferry HMAS *Kuttabul* was intense, throwing portions of the shattered hull high into the sky and killing twenty-one men.

The boat

The Type A midget submarines were approximately 24 metres (80 feet) in length, carried two 18-inch torpedoes, a crew of two, and were powered by pre-charged batteries driving a 600 hp electric motor. Notoriously difficult to keep in trim, the craft had an estimated endurance of about 12 hours before they would have to refresh. A composite display midget submarine on display at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, is made up of the remains of midget *Ha-14* and *Ha-21* recovered from the Sydney raid in 1942. The

remaining conning tower (from midget *Ha-21*) is on display at the Naval Heritage Centre, Garden Island, Sydney. None of the five mother submarines survived wartime operations, though several were involved in a successful campaign against Allied shipping off the Australian coast between 1942-3. Interestingly, *I-22* and *I-24* had launched previous midget submarines during the Pearl Harbour attack six months before.

Wreck event

The Sydney attack mirrored the earlier midget submarine operations at Pearl Harbour (7 December 1941) and the raid on Diego Suarez in Madagascar (30 May 1942). The Sydney raid involved five large ocean going submarines, *I-22*, *I-24*, *I-27* with their three midget submarines, and *I-21* and *I-29* providing support. A sixth intended submarine *I-28* was sunk by the US submarine USS *Tautog* before it could deploy with a fourth midget. The five remaining mother-submarines, which had left Truk (Chuuk) Lagoon in the Pacific Ocean, arranged themselves in a semi-circle centred on Sydney Heads. A previous flight (29 May) by a reconnaissance aircraft launched from *I-21* has spotted potential targets inside the harbour. This Glen-type twin-float seaplane capsized when returning to its submarine and was scuttled.

At about 8pm on the Sunday evening, the first midget (number *Ha-14* from *I-27*) commanded by Lieutenant Chuman, motored submerged into the harbour.



M24 wreck site lying upright in 54 metres of water, three miles offshore from Bungan Head, Newport, Sydney.

Unfortunately for its crew, the boat became fouled inside the still incomplete anti-submarine boom net laid across the harbour between Georges Head and Green Point near Watson's Bay. Observed by surface craft near the Western Gate, the two-man Japanese crew

decided to commit suicide when escape was hopeless. Firing the forward internal scuttling charge at 10.30pm, the blast destroyed the fore end of the submarine.

Midget A (according to the Allied order of identification) from *I-24* (or *M24*), commanded by Sub Lieutenant Ban with Petty Officer Ashibe, next entered the harbour and followed a Manly ferry through the boom defences. The exact serial number of this submarine has not been ascertained. The submarine crossed the Indicator Loop system at about 9:48 pm. In a cat-and-mouse play, the submarine manoeuvred around the harbour and was sighted several times around 11:00 pm near the naval base.



Detail of upper torpedo tube, partly removed from the hull by fishing hook ups.

Under fire from the heavy cruiser USS *Chicago* and several other vessels, the submarine successfully fired its two torpedoes about 12.30am from near Bradley's Head. Both missed *Chicago* - the prime target, one running onto Garden Island and failing to explode. The other struck under the ferry HMAS *Kuttabul* after passing under the Dutch submarine *K-IX* at its berth. The explosion sank *Kuttabul* and killed 21 aboard. Ban's midget submarine escaped the harbour and was never recovered, many theories later abounded regarding its probable resting-place.

The third midget, *Ha-21* from *I-22* commanded by Lieutenant Matsuo crept into the harbour and was sighted near the Heads at about 11.00 pm, was depth charged, laid low, and made a belated entry around 3:00am just as *Chicago* was leaving port. The midget was variously sighted in the vicinity of Bradleys Head and the Zoo. The midget was caught in Taylors Bay by 5:00 am and attacked with depth charges from harbour defence craft HMAS *Seamist*, *Steady Hour* and *Yarroma* until 8:30 am in the morning of 1 June and fatally crippled. When recovered with its two live torpedoes and unexploded

(though fired) scuttling charges, the crew were found dead, having committed suicide using the service pistol.

Protection

Sydney-based recreational SCUBA divers from a private club, No Frills Divers, located the remains of Ban and Ashibe's missing *M24* midget submarine off Sydney's Northern Beaches in November 2006. The wreck was found three miles offshore from Bungan Head near Newport in fifty-four metres of water.

A No-entry Protected Zone was declared around the protected Historic Shipwreck on 1 December 2006 under the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*.

The No Entry zone is bounded by a circle with radius of 500 metres, centred on 33° 40' 21" South latitude with the meridian 151° 22' 58" East longitude (WGS84 datum).

Entry is restricted to site managers while the archaeological survey work is completed. Permits are issued by the Heritage Office, Sydney.



A sonar buoy on site, part of a sophisticated surveillance system implemented by the Australian Federal and NSW State Governments. The buoy denotes the centre of the 500-metre radius No-Entry zone around the *M24* wreck site. (Zylotech Ltd. - <http://www.zylotech.com.au/>)

The wreck and its 500-metre radius zone is also protected as an item of State heritage significance on the State Heritage Register (SHR) under Section 33, NSW *Heritage Act 1977*. Penalties up to \$AUS1.1 million apply for disturbance to the wreck and surrounding debris field. The Heritage Office coordinates the archaeological survey and site protection measures.

Maritime Heritage Online, Heritage Office
<http://maritime.heritage.nsw.gov.au>

Attorney Generals Department
<http://www.ag.gov.au/portal/govqazonline.nsf>

Department of Environment and Water Resources
<http://www.environment.gov.au/index.html>
Tim Smith Crown copyright ©2007

Supported by the Historic Shipwrecks Program



Australian Government

Department of the Environment and Heritage